Toronto Festival of Preaching
Does Christianity Need the Church? Intro

I cannot think of a more audacious act, bordering on public foolishness, than standing up in the company of fellow believers and, in essence, declaring, “Thus Saith the Lord.” I cannot think of a more challenging responsibility than to accept a group of people’s invitation to bring a life saving word from the Lord to them once a week or so, consistently, steadily, faithfully, in season and out of season, on good days and not so good days. It is so daunting, some are overwhelmed by the responsibility, driven to despair by it. Some, many perhaps, do not acknowledge the importance, the potential for life embedded deeply in the act, and so, sadly, give it only a small portion of their time, attention, their passion.

I am one who has done it on most Sunday mornings for more than 50 years. On occasion, staring at a blank sheet of paper, late in the week, with not even a notion of what I ought to write and say, distracted by the necessities of the life of a busy church, the denominations’ committees and Task Forces, the Rotary Lunch and Jr. High sports banquet at which I agreed to offer an invocation, exhausted by the relentless demands of a profession whose job description knows no limits, whatever creative well I used to have, bone dry and dusty, I tried to comfort myself by remembering basic theological ecclesiology, that they will be there Sunday morning to worship and praise God, that I am not the whole show, that I must not get in the way, that the liturgy, after all, can and will carry the freight – and then, calling myself up short – They will come to hear what I say. They may not put it this way but they come on the outside hope that my words will somehow offer hope, encouragement, healing, a robust challenge, a reason to go on with whatever it is they are doing: that in my words there will be a word from the Lord.

I have been driven to despair, staring at that blank sheet and wondering, after all these years, if I really belonged in this business. maybe I should have gone to law school. Maybe I should be selling insurance. I have ground one out, sentence by sentence, word by word, until I had filled up the requisite number of legal-size sheets – 10 to be exact – that experience has taught me will take 20 minutes to deliver: carried it into the pulpit on Sunday morning, embarrassed at its weaknes and irrelevance, ashamed of myself for not doing it better, only to be stunned when someone said afterward, “You must have written that for me…That was exactly what I needed to hear,” and fought back the urge to say, “You gotta be kidding! That was a lousy sermon,” and instead found myself mumbling “Thank you,” not so much to my parishioner as to God who apparently really can use the humblest effort to speak a healing word to someone who needs it.

In The Anatomy of Preaching: Identifying the Issues in Preaching Today, David Larsen describes the cathedral in Dijon, France, where beside the

pulpit sits an angel with a pen. “The angel tilts toward the pulpit as if expectant. People, angels and God listen and evaluate.” About preaching, Karl Barth once famously said, “On Sunday morning when the bells ring to call the congregation and minister to church, there is in the air an expectancy that something great, crucial, and even momentous is about to happen.” [The Word of God and the World of Man, Harper & Row]

Jesus, the Gospel writer says, “Came preaching.” Preaching has been at the heart of the Church’s life and witness from the beginning. From that improbable beginning it has been based on the notion that God has something to say to creation, that it is the very essence of God to want to communicate with the creation, that is so of the essence of the Divine that the Fourth Gospel says, “In the Beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” God, we believe, spoke, and speaks, in creation, in the ongoing evolution of life and the world and the universe around us. God, we believe, spoke to men and women back at the edge of history, called them by name, called them to live in covenant with one another and with God, called them, in their obedient and faithful life together, to be a word to the world, a light to the nations.

God, we believe, spoke, ultimately, fully, in the birth of a child and the life of a young man, God speaking in Him, teaching love and justice, compassion and kindness, healing, forgiving, breaking down barriers, reconciling, and finally, in one magnificent, almost unspeakable act, speaking in the young man’s death on the cross, his full descent into humanness, alienation, isolation, despair. God, we believe, spoke in the sun’s first rays at dawn on the first day of that week: spoke a saving, life-giving word of hope in his resurrection.

God, we believe used, and uses, human words, the words of a library, collected and assembled over centuries: law, history, poetry, hymns, prophets, gospels, letters.

God, and this most improbable of all, continues to use the words of women and men who read, and study and struggle with the words in that sacred library, and study the world around them and wrestle with their own doubts, their intellectual capacities, their emotions and deepest passions, and then stand up in the midst of a gathered congregation and speak.

There is, frankly, nothing quite like it in human history and human experience. In an age of instant, digital communication, an age so fast that attention spans are measured in seconds, an age of 24-hour news cycles, and rabid talk shows and advertising so superbly sophisticated that we aren’t even aware of its deeply persuasive power – it is a major miracle, is it not, that they still come, get out of bed on Sunday morning, sit on hardwood pews and give their undivided attention to the woman or man they have

called to be the preacher. They will do that for no one else, every week, 20-25 minutes of silent, uninterrupted, undivided attention.

I am of the opinion, for what it is worth, that as goes preaching, so goes the church: that essential to the life and faithfulness and mission of the church is preaching, the regular proclamation of Good News, through which God continues to address the church and the world.

Not so very long ago, we imagined that the day of preaching had come and gone: that communication is dialogic not monologic, that a preacher – himself or herself – represented an obsolete model, hierarchical, elitist, and, in the past at least, altogether masculine. It followed that the education and preparation of clergy focused on other things, on human relationships, human potential, organization development, community building – all of which, I hasten to say, are important, essential, relevant. But some of us, as a consequence, were released into the church without even having read a book or taken a class or engaged in the discipline of preaching.

We are, thanks be to God, in a different place today. Preaching has made something of a comeback.

And so, I am pleased and honored to be part of this project, The Toronto Festival of Preaching, and I am honored to be among some of the best of us: Janet Childers, Malcolm Sinclair, David Lose, Paul Scott Wilson. As I thought about what I might bring to the Festival, I was keenly aware that my fellow presenters know a lot more about preaching than I do – and that I might be safer taking a different tack.

And so The Church, the body in which preaching happens; the institution, I have proposed, that depends on preaching: the phenomenon which almost everybody agrees is either in a lot of trouble, or in its death throes, or is changing so rapidly that those of us who live in it, work in it, care about, are perplexed, fearful and even, on occasion, hopeful.

“What in the world will become of us?” or, another way of asking – “Does Christianity need the church?”